JAMES EARL RAY
Pleaded Guilty

Ray's Renewed Plea for Full Trial Pinned on Death of Original Judge

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. — James Earl Ray, who 10 years ago pleaded guilty to murdering Martin Luther King Jr., is trying again to win a full trial.

Circuit Court Judge William H. Williams was to hear arguments Thursday on a petition that says Ray is entitled to a new trial because the original judge before whom Ray pleaded guilty died before hearing his motion for a new trial.

The petition, filed Jan. 26, also says Ray's conviction was flawed because it did not specify the degree of the murder charge.

Ray's case will be argued by two controversial lawyers: Mark Lane, the Peoples Temple attorney who was in Guyana at the time of the cult's mass murder-suicide ritual, and Charles Galbreath, a former judge who caused a furor when he wrote a letter to Hustler magazine on official court stationery.

Ray, 51, pleaded guilty March 10, 1969, before the late Judge W. Preston Battle to the April 4, 1968, assassination of the civil rights leader and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He later recanted his plea, but Battle died before Ray could make a motion for a full trial.

In 1974, Ray was granted a hearing in federal court on his request for a new trial. He said he was pressured into pleading guilty by lawyer Percy Foreman and author William Bradford Huie.